

Educational social policy in britain after ww11



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The following essay will attempt to analyse and highlight the development of educational social policy in Britain after the post-second world war era. It will be important for the essay to illustrate how the secondary school system was changed by the 1944 Education Act, and how this impacted on secondary schooling in the decades that followed. The essay will attempt to illustrate and highlight the key developments within the education system such as the move back from local authority to more centralized government control. Finally, the essay will analyse social policy implemented by New Labour and in particular how the policy changes have affected secondary schools in the most deprived areas of the country. The essay will also focus on the continuation of specialist schools from the Conservative party to New Labour and aim to review the criticisms on the schools.

After the Second World War in 1945, Clement Attlee's (1945-1951) Labour government implemented the " Education Act 1944" which created a three tier school system involving secondary schools, and for the first time in Britain ensured the provision of free education for all children. The new system of secondary schools would cater for children aged between the ages of 11 to 15 years old, and divide the children in to three distinct types of schooling. These were Grammar, Technical and Secondary modern schools, entry to the schools would be determined via a universal examination, known as the eleven-plus (Bochel & et al, 2009, p. 238).

In theory this would allow children to be allocated the school which best suited their academic ability. So a pupil who scored highly in the eleven plus would go to the grammar school and the pupil who was more suited to a technical career would go to the technical school, the others would be sent

to the secondary modern schools. Essentially the Education Act of 1944 allowed the Labour Government to provide the provision of financial support to local authorities, thus allowing the local authorities to control the education in their areas and gave them the freedom to manage their schools as they wished. Within these schools there was to be a sense of academic balance. But in reality, there were few technical schools, which meant the system was more two tiered rather than three tiered. Since grammar schools were selective, and secondary moderns took the rest, there was never a sense of academic balance.

According to Bochel & et al (2009, p. 239) during the 1960's Labour government policy changed and they began to introduce non-selective or as they were known "comprehensive schools" gradually. The arguments for comprehensives are they reduce the likelihood of discrimination or disadvantage on the basis of class, and that they improve the prospects of children of middling ability. The main argument against is that the selective system may be more consistent with the idea of equality of opportunity. Working class children who went to grammar schools did better than those who go now to comprehensive schools. Another factor that contributed towards the transformation of secondary schooling between the 1940's and the 1970's was due to the fact that Britain did not want to fall behind in terms of economic reasons. Hence, the rise of technical school in order to compete against her European neighbors in the job markets.

By 1979 the Conservative government had gained power in Britain and Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, during this period Britain had been suffering from an economic slump. Improving the state of Britain's economy

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was the fundamental and overriding pledge of the Conservative government during this period. The Conservative based its principles on the Neoliberal or New Right as it is commonly known, consisted of believing that the job of education should mainly be concerned with promoting economic growth through improving the basic skills of the future work force. This could be achieved by encouraging competition in the educational marketplace, which in theory would raise schools in regards to efficiency and educational standards (Blackmore & Griggs, 2007, p. 139).

According to Boichel & et al (2009, p. 241) the first educational policy the Conservatives put in place was the “ Education Act 1980” which gave the local authority the freedom to introduce the “ Assisted Places Scheme” and not continue with the comprehensive education system of secondary schooling. The “ Assisted Places Scheme” allowed high academic attaining children from poor family backgrounds to be eligible to attend fee-paying private schools. However, the biggest change in educational social policy under the Conservative government came in 1988 with implementation of the “ Education Act 1988”.

In contrast with the 1940’s social democratic Labour government thinking which gave the freedom to local authorities to develop their own plans on how to manage schools in their area, and the funding to support those ideas. The Conservative government of the late 1980’s centralized control of state schools by the process of “ Grant maintained schools”. The concept involved allowing state schools to opt out of local authority control if the enough parents voted to support his move. The idea behind this concept was to free up schools and allow them to specialize in subjects or attract higher

achieving pupils. The Conservatives' hoped this would offer a real choice for parents, and encourage schools to compete in the educational marketplace (Baldock & et al, 2007, p391).

As well as, offering schools to opt out of local authority control, the Education Act 1988 also gave parents the right to send their children to the school of their choice. Once again the Conservatives' believed that "Open enrolment" would encourage a marketplace in which schools would have to compete against each other and improve their results. In conjunction with this piece of legislation was another piece of legislation which identified that under the new system the financing of schools would be dictated by the number of pupils that had enrolled there. For example, schools that were seen as being successful would attract larger numbers of pupils thus they would receive more funding.

This would in theory act as a boost to underachieving schools to improve (Alcock, 2008, p. 43). In order for parents to ascertain which secondary schools were the most successful it was necessary for government to instigate a way of testing and assessing how the schools were performing. The Education Act 1988 policy makers developed the "national curriculum" in order for the results to be published and establish league tables to help provide information to parents so they could make an informed choice.

In 1997 the Labour government came back in to power under the reinvented name of "New Labour", one of New Labour's manifesto pledges was "Education, Education, Education". New Labour have developed and built on the Conservative's 1988 Education Act. New Labour were influenced by their

socialist roots and in 1998 decided to develop the “ Education Action Zones” which were set up to help raise educational standards and combat social exclusion in some of Britain’s most deprived areas (Ellison & Pierson, 2003, p. 186). In order to help alleviate this social inequality, Labour decided to design academies to replace “ failing” comprehensive schools in lower income and inner city areas.

This social policy had been devised to dramatically improve the educational standards within these deprived areas, the academies work by being sponsored by wealthy individuals, religious faiths, charities, businesses and by city education authorities (Ellison & Pierson, 2003, p. 186). Although, there have been some improvements in GCSE’s at the academies, there has been some strong criticisms levelled against them. There have been reports of academies taking less students with special or students with behavioural problems. Another criticism made against the academies involves the influence of sponsors, how far can a sponsor dictate what the school can teach or not teach? Would a deeply religious sponsor allow certain scientific ideology to be taught if they conflicted with the sponsors beliefs?

As well as developing the inner city academies, New Labour also continued to use Conservatives’ policy on “ grant maintained schools”, as they also believed it would provide diversity and choice within the educational market-place. Labour social policy believed in schools specializing in particular subject areas rather than a single type of school for everyone. For a state school to attain specialist status it would need to raise £50, 000 in funding from the private sector sponsors.

In 2005, the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Skills published a report on a two-year study into secondary education. The study showed that specialist schools tend to have a higher ratio of middle-class pupils than non-specialist schools. So this may account for their better results. The report also highlighted schools in low income areas have difficulty in raising funds to become a specialist school. Research also indicates that some specialist schools will select those they view as being the most able students in order to enhance their results, and these students tend to come from a middle class background and not from a poorer background.

In conclusion, the development of education during the last six-fifty years has seen dramatic changes. The post-second world war establishment of the tripartite school system; broke the mould in Britain by offering free access to secondary school to all children aged 11-15 years old. It was conceived to offer children a chance to fulfil their potential by way of dividing them into the appropriate category according to their abilities. But this was shown to be a divisive system and catered only for children who had shown some academic ability whilst taking the eleven plus exam. It eventually highlighted the inequalities within the tripartite system due to the fact there were few technical schools, and most children who were not academic high fliers were consigned to study at secondary modern schools. This was also coupled with the fact that the exclusive grammar schools were selecting on high academic potential.

During the Conservative era of power and especially in the Education Act of 1988 again highlights the inequalities of educational social policy. Making
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schools publish their exam results in league tables would further establish the haves and the have not within society. Although, the league table would offer parents a better insight into the better performing schools, this would also have a negative effect on the poorly performing schools. As the best schools would have an enormous amount of people trying to enrol in to them, it would only harm the least performing schools in as much as that the more students you could have at the school the more funding the school would receive from the local authority.

When New Labour came in to power in 1997, the nation expected the dismantling of the Conservative policy on education; but New Labour continued to use certain aspects of the Education Act 1988. One of the policies that they have continued is setting up specialist schools, but this has also been shown to up the inequality between student enrolments. As the 2005 House of Commons Selective Committee has concluded that the high rankings in the league tables could be due to the fact that they are more likely to admit pupils from middle class backgrounds than working class backgrounds. New Labour policies on raising educational standards in the more deprived areas of major inner cities by implementing academy status on failing secondary comprehensive schools does seem to have worked in small amounts. Although, there is some concern that sponsorship of the academies could be divisive due to the fact that it really does depend on who the sponsor is and what they want to add on to the curriculum.